"Zombies in the classroom….and no, we are not referring to our students"

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> Often, a school is your best bet – perhaps not for education but certainly for protection from an undead attack. (Max Brooks, *The Zombie Survival Guide)*

Zombies, walkers, creepers, shamblers, and biters. No matter what term is used to describe the concept of reanimated corpses who share their semi-terminal infection with living humans by biting them in their quest for brains and human flesh, these threats to human existence have fascinated people throughout history. While the public's fascination with zombies and the apocalyptic threat they represent for modern culture has grown slowly since the release of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968, it has only been since the 2003 publication of *The Walking Dead* comic book series created by Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore that zombies truly arose and entered the mainstream. In the last few years there has been an veritable explosion in zombie related items in all possible media forms: from books (*World War Z*, *Day By Day Armageddon*, *Adrian's Undead Diaries*); to television series (AMC's *Walking Dead*, SciFi's *Z Nation*, BBC's *In the Flesh*); to video games for all video game platforms (*The Last of Us*, *Resident Evil*, and *Red Dead Redemption*); to movies (*Dead Snow 2: Red vs Dead*, *Resident Evil*, *28 Weeks Later*, *Zombieland*); and even a reality show about the filming of a zombie movie (*Town of the Living Dead*) and a upcoming game show (*I Survived a Zombie Apocalypse*) presented by the BBC online. This interest in zombies is not confined to the United States and England, though, as filmmakers from more than thirty-two different countries have added to the growing corpus of work.

An even more interesting example of the growing status of zombies in the public mind happened in 2014. At that time, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) posted "Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse", a lighthearted blog entry by the Director of the CDC's Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response. The blog post claimed it was written to inform people on how to prepare for a zombie outbreak. Of course the more serious purpose of the post, according to the Director of the CDC, was to encourage

the public to plan for and prepare for more probable catastrophes by examining how one would prepare for a zombie outbreak. What surprised the CDC was how much attention the post garnered (Kolowich). The blog post generated more than 30,000 hits before the servers hosting the post crashed, more than ten times the normal traffic that CDC blog posts typically receive. In addition, the number of CDC twitter followers increased by one hundred times – from 12,000 to 1.2 million (Bell) after the post. Due to the popularity of the post, the CDC has incorporated the issue into its official CDC webpages (Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response, "Zombie Preparedness" http://www.cdc.gov/phpr/zombies.htm.) While it is uncertain how many people are "true believers" in zombies, it is clear from these numbers that a significant number of people are fascinated by them.

As this fascination with zombies has steadily grown, enterprising teachers and professors have attempted to capitalize on the popularity of this genre by incorporating zombies into their classrooms in one reanimated form or another. Recent articles have provided helpful examples of ways to incorporate the undead into a variety of college subjects such as International Relations (Blanton 2013), Adult Education and Human Resource Development (Wright), Comparative Political Economy (Hall), International Politics (Drezner), and English (Tulley).

One field that has been slower than the zombies in *Shaun of the Dead* in finding ways to integrate zombies into the curriculum is history. Historians have typically not incorporated pop culture concepts into the classroom because history as a discipline tends to look to the past and usually does not focus on the present (Jeansonne). Some historians also, as with other academics, tend to take themselves too seriously, and fail to separate research from teaching. While incorporating research into the classroom is to be encouraged, sharing it with undergraduates in the same dry, jargon-filled, monotonous delivery as an academic talk is sure to result in a classroom of zombies, just not the fun types. Some academics even avoid popular material out of a sense of fear that referencing such ideas may damage their scholarly reputations. A colleague of ours once remarked that no one who talks about zombies can be taken seriously, implying that the use of zombies as a teaching tool invalidates all the other scholarly work the individual has done. We console ourselves with the knowledge that if there is a zombie apocalypse, these individuals will be the first to go – "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" as the famous history saying goes.

All joking aside, this exclusionary stance represents not only a troubling elitism but also a very real lost educational opportunity. The public interest in zombies is, in fact, rooted in important historical trends and cultural concerns. Acknowledging those concerns and engaging with them offers history teachers a valuable way to engage today's students. For far too long, many students have viewed history as an overly serious subject meaning, though we hate to say it, "stuffy" and "boring." Anything that combats that stereotype of history and instead presents the discipline as lively and engaging is

highly valuable as a means for engaging learners.

It is in this spirit of promoting history with the broadest lens that has led us for the past two years, near Halloween, to give a presentation about zombies to our department's History Club: "How History Can Prepare You for the Inevitable Zombie Apocalypse." The attendance at these meetings grows by fourfold when compared to a normal History Club meeting, demonstrating the pull that the undead exert upon the living. The presentation consists of two parts: A "historical" overview of zombies in texts, movies, and video games; and a semi-humorous look at how to protect oneself in the event of a zombie attack. One of the things we cover during the protection section is asking the students where they would hole up on campus if a zombie attack happened while they were in class. This forces the students to consider the campus' buildings from a completely different perspective, and always results in students coming up to us weeks after the event saying that they have been thinking about this, and what do we think about using building X for safety?

To be fair to those serious historians out there, we must admit that the overwhelming majority of zombie films (*Pontypool*, *Dead Snow*, *Day of the Dead*) and novels (*Zombie, Ohio*, *Night of the Living Trekkies*, *The Last Bastion of the Living*) are situated in the present or near future, implying that the threat zombies represent is strictly a modern one. The number of zombie infestations set in the past is far fewer, and these situations are often created to capitalize on a specific tie-in. For example, the direct to video *Abraham Lincoln vs. Zombies* did show zombies in an historical context, but the film was clearly released as a way to capitalize off the much more successful *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*. A much better use of zombies in a historical setting is the excellent parody by Seth Grahame-Smith called *Pride, Prejudice, and Zombies* which introduces the undead into Jane Austen's classic work, *Pride and Prejudice*. While the burgeoning popularity of the zombie genre has recently inspired more authors and filmmakers to explore the topic of historical zombies, these works remain outside the mainstream and only draw attention from hardcore zombie enthusiasts. But, since we are those kind of enthusiasts, we do direct interested readers to *Evil in the Time of Heroes* (Ancient Greece); *De Bello Lemures* (Rome); *Knight of the Dead* and *The Scourge* (Late Medieval England); *Undead or Alive* (American West); *By the Blood of Heroes: The Great Undead War* (World War I); and *World War of the Dead* (World War II).

While on the surface it may appear that trying to incorporate zombies, a modern creation, successfully into a history class would be a daunting task, it is actually easier than one would expect. Zombies represent death, danger, chaos, and a breakdown of civilization. All societies throughout history have demonstrated concerns and fears regarding these issues. In fact, these issues make zombies of interest to a wide range of disciplines well beyond history. As the actor Mark Pellegrino points out,

> There's a lot of speculation on what the zombie apocalypse thing means. I have a feeling that it's kind of an expression of our subconscious fears. I think we know that

> something big and impossible - some enormous crash, equalizing crash, whatever - may be coming around the corner. ("Horror tv Shows")

The timeless nature of these fears is what can be used to connect modern zombies to events in history of any period. We, the authors of this paper, are respectively an ancient historian and a medieval historian. These are two fields that on the surface would seem far removed from the modern concept of the undead. We would like to show, however, that there are many opportunities to use zombies to connect students to past societies, even ones as distant as Greece and Rome.

Ancient History

> Then there gathered from out of Erebus the spirits of those that are dead, brides, and unwedded youths, and toil-worn old men, and tender maidens with hearts yet new to sorrow, and many, too, that had been wounded with bronze-tipped spears, men slain in fight, wearing their blood-stained armor. These came thronging in crowds about the pit from every side, with a wondrous cry; and pale fear seized me. Odyssey 11.35-45 (COMPLETE CITATION NEEDED)

For ancient history, the two most obvious parallels with modern zombies are how the ancients viewed and dealt with plagues and other large-scale infections, and their interaction with living dead. One of the more famous of these incidents was the plague that affected Athens at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. According to the historian Thucydides, in 430 BC, in the second year of the war, a disease that had originated in Ethiopia reached Athens. Since the population of the surrounding countryside had sought shelter within Athens' walls from an invading Spartan army, resulting in overcrowded conditions within the city, the disease spread rapidly. Thucydides, an eyewitness and surviving victim, recorded that the disease was unknown to the Greeks, and so virulent that between one third to one half of the city's population died. Those who became infected suffered from high fevers, sneezing, nausea, skin ulcers, insomnia, diarrhea, and memory loss (Thucydides 2.47-55). There have been many modern attempts to identify the plague that struck Athens, and at various times the disease has been identified as smallpox, anthrax, bubonic plague, endemic typhus, typhoid, scarlet fever, Rift Valley fever, malaria, ergotism, toxic shock syndrome with Staphylococcus, Lassa fever, Ebola, and arboviruses. To date, however, no one has been able to argue convincingly for one disease over the others (Littmann).

The fear that the plague induced in the Athenian population resulted in sudden and drastic modifications to many people's behavior, much like the changes that occur in modern crowds dealing with zombie invasions. In Athens, people spent their money as if they believed there would be no tomorrow, ignored laws and rules, questioned their religious beliefs, and basically did whatever they wanted

to do, since they believed that there would be no consequences for their actions. They also ignored the sick and left the dying wherever they fell (Thucydides 2.47-55). That sort of behavior is a problem whether one is dealing with a real world plague or a zombie infestation, though probably a bit worse in the case of zombie outbreaks.

Plagues continued to affect the ancient Mediterranean over the following centuries, such as the Antonine plague in the second century AD (Galen), and another one in the third century AD (Zosimus, I.26-46). The next major outbreak occurred during the reign of Justinian in the sixth century AD. This infection seems to be one of the first outbreaks of the bubonic plague, as the victims all developed the easily recognizable buboes, or swollen lymph nodes (Procopius 11, 22-23). Accounts of this outbreak describe people dying in the street, while many people barricaded themselves in their homes and refused to venture outside, even when the disease struck someone in the house (John of Ephesus fragment 11, E). While the description of these ancient plagues lack the detailed, scientific descriptions that accompany modern diseases, they do provide an ideal opportunity for an instructor to demonstrate the similarities between ancient and modern societies in how they handle an outbreak. Even more importantly, this type of discussion allows students who should be aware recent outbreaks (Ebola, Bird Flu, Enterovirus D68) to connect to past populations on a personal level. For those students who are unaware of these outbreaks, it should, hopefully, serve as an incentive to stay abreast of current events.

While plagues resulted in a breakdown of society, the dead and dying represent an opportunity for acquiring both knowledge and a deadly contagion. For ancient societies, descent into the underworld and visiting the living dead is a common motif, known as katabasis. Gilgamesh, a king of ancient Mesopotamia and the main character of The Epic of Gilgamesh, and his first rival, then friend Enkidu, both experience the land of the dead (Epic of Gilgamesh). The Greek hero Hercules, for his twelfth labor, entered the underworld and interacted with the dead during his quest to bring back the three-headed watchdog Cerberus to Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns who had assigned him his twelve labors (Apollodorus 2.5.12). Orpheus, a famous Greek poet and musician, travelled to the underworld in an unsuccessful attempt to bring his wife Eurydice back to the land of the living, after she succumbed to the bite of a viper (Ovid 10.1-85).

While there are many instances of heroes and heroines visiting the underworld, the two best comparisons between modern zombies and ancient views of the dead can be found in the two great classics: the Odyssey by Homer and the Aeneid by Virgil. The Odyssey recounts the story of the Greek hero Odysseus and his ten-year voyage as he attempts to return home to his wife Penelope and his son Telemachus. In book eleven of the Odyssey, in an attempt to speak to the dead, Odysseus sacrifices two sheep and lets their blood run into a trench. When the dead arrive they are drawn to the blood and circle around it making a horrible wailing that terrifies Odysseus. As the dead drink the blood and speak to Odysseus, they tell him their stories and answer his questions. When Odysseus speaks to Achilles, Achilles tells him that death is not pleasurable and that he would

rather be a poor servant who was alive than the king of the dead (Odyssey 11). Odysseus speaking to the dead in the underworld is an ideal discussion topic for an ancient history class since it allows the instructor to ask the class to consider what the passage says about how the ancient Greeks viewed life and death, and how this influenced their daily lives. This discussion is one that can then be revisited as other cultures and societies are examined in class, providing a common thread that can be followed all the way to the present.

Perhaps the closest parallel between an ancient story dealing with death and destruction and a modern one recounting a zombie attack can be found in comparing Virgil's epic The Aeneid with the graphic novel The Walking Dead. In the Aeneid, Vigil tells the story of the Trojan hero Aeneas, who after the destruction of Troy by the Greeks, gathers a group of surviving Trojans and flees westward looking for sanctuary and a new home. The Walking Dead follows the life of Sheriff Rick Grimes who awakens from a coma to find that the world has been overrun by zombies and that he has to undertake a journey to find his family and a safe haven. In these two stories, the heroes (Aeneas/Rick Grimes) have their home towns (Troy/Cynthiana, Kentucky) destroyed by an invasion (Greeks/Zombies). Each loses his wife (Creusa/Lori) and is accompanied on his travels by his young son (Ascanius/Carl). Along the way the survivors variously find safety (Carthage/Herschel's farm) and encounter dangers (Celaeno, a harpy/The Governor), before finding a new safe haven to settle in (Latium (Italy)/Alexandria), even though both still face future threats to their safety (Turnus/unknown band of humans). These parallels are what makes zombies an effective classroom tool for helping students understand ancient history, which they often resist learning about because of its perceived alien nature when compared to modern times. The willingness of today's students to embrace the alternate reality of a zombie apocalypse, however, makes zombies a practical transition for helping students see past the differences and embrace the similarities.

The Middle Ages

Awash in a Sea of Death
The Black Death and the Zombie Apocalypse

"Wisely they leave graves open to the dead,
Cause some too early are brought to bed.
One out of the trance returned, after much strife,
Among a troop of dead, exclaims for life!"

Epiloimia Epe – William Austin, 1660

The zombie, as depicted in contemporary graphic novels and films, performs several functions. It is the agent of death on a massive scale, the harbinger of apocalypse, and the active agent of dystopia. The appearance of the zombie in graphic novels and films almost always portends the end of the world as we know it. The initial horrific attacks of the dead on the living are typically misunderstood, and the reality is always minimized or localized by media reports. It

seems that human consciousness is unable to deal with the appearance of so great a horror in the midst of a civilized and mundane existence. It is precisely this trope that can be utilized in the classroom to offer students insight into the great catastrophes that serve as grim mile markers in the long course of human history, and can link today's students to peoples of the past through common fears.

The history of medieval Europe in general, and the thirteenth century in particular, are rife with violence, incidences of mass death, and socio-political disintegration that seemed to many contemporaries as evidence that they were witnessing the "end of days." Famine, war, and pestilence were fixtures in the long history of the Middle Ages. Medieval chronicles are surprisingly blasé in their accounts of such occurrences until we reach what Barbara Tuchman called "a violent, tormented, bewildered, suffering and disintegrating age, a time, as many thought, of Satan triumphant" (Tuchman xiii). It was during this dark time that the four horsemen of the apocalypse suddenly were loosed and had free reign over the human race, just as in contemporary fiction and film the undead appear seemingly from nowhere to exact their gruesome toll. The similarities that can be observed in both apocalyptic scenarios provide many useful insights for the teaching of history.

Like the literary and cinematic depictions of the initial zombie outbreaks in a defined community or geographic area, the bubonic plague or Black Death raised little in the way of anxiety or even cursory notice from people who were focused on the ordinary affairs of daily life when it first appeared. Although there were no blaring police and EMT vehicle sirens that modern urbanites typically ignore as routine, medieval people were similarly all too accustomed to the presence of sickness and death in their towns and villages. Medieval daily life was dangerous and difficult so that a dreary complacency gripped the hearts and minds of many fourteenth century people.

As in modern zombie tales, there were rumors and speculation as to the source of the medieval plague. Fourteenth-century Europeans heard rumors too, news of a "terrible plague supposedly arising in China and spreading through Turkey, to India and Persia, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt" (Byrne 5). It is also of note that in a good deal of popular zombie fiction the outbreaks are far eastern in origin. And news of the spread of the contagion follows the ethereal highways of the worldwide web. In zombie fiction, news of the swift and deadly progress of the affliction is unprecedented and unimaginable. So, too, did Europeans hear of death tolls so devastating that all of India was said to be depopulated, whole territories covered by dead bodies, other areas with no one left alive.

In much of the zombie genre there is speculation on the cause of the outbreak only after the reality of the dead eating the living has been established beyond any doubt. The literary and film survivors have experienced at first hand the horror of family members, friends, and assorted strangers suddenly slaughtered and consumed before their seeing, yet uncomprehending eyes. The horror can no longer be ignored, denigrated, or rationalized. The dead are walking the earth and eating the living with gusto. When the plague reached the fringes of the Mediterranean in the fourteenth century it, too, could

no longer be ignored. “At this point Muslims and Christians began recording what they understood of the plague’s origins and the horrors to which they had become unwilling witnesses” (Byrne 5). First accounts of the effects of the plague on a previously healthy person resemble the fictional zombie scenarios in their suddenness and horror. “First of all it would hit one as if with a lance, choking and then the swelling would appear, or spitting of blood with shivering, and fire would burn in all the joints of the body; and then illness would overwhelm one.” (Chronicle of Novgorod 186) Although the progression of symptoms vary among the victims of zombie bites, this description of the course of plague symptoms are very much like the cinematic and literary depictions of human victims who undergo the process of “turning” from humans into zombies.

Modern survivors in the brave new world of the undead typically seek causal explanations for the zombie phenomenon. “Where does this come from?” “Why is this happening?” Typically the living who care about causes and reasons find solace in science, but in much of the zombie fiction science cannot address the death of hope and the darkness of despair and dim prospects for the human race. Some examples of the genre invoke the power of evil or a malign intelligence to explain the disaster. So too did the medieval mind seek answers but without the benefit of modern science and technology. The medieval imagination was already fertile ground for supernatural explanations. “Having no idea of microscopic carriers, they had to assume that the air was corrupted by planetary influences.” (Note that director George Romero’s original Night of the Living Dead invokes the passage of a comet and the disruption of the Van Allen belt as causal factors.) But in the end medieval men looked to the heavens for answers as the apparent absence of material causes made the plague seem the result of malign and diabolical forces.

The literary and cinematic tales of the zombie apocalypse focus on the effects of the disaster on survivors. In some depictions the focus is on a solitary survivor and his efforts to go it alone in the midst of impossible odds. Other examples of the genre focus on groups who must face the same long odds in the course of daily survival. But whether as individuals or members of a group, the survivors must come to grips with the destruction of their former way of life. As Rick Grimes says “You people don't know what we are. We're surrounded by the dead. We're among them--and when we finally give up we become them! We're living on borrowed time here.” (Walking Dead, Vol. 4: The Heart’s Desire). All that went before exists no longer. Wives, husbands, children, lovers, friends and neighbors have been killed or number among the living dead and still pose a threat to life and sanity. Rick, in The Walking Dead graphic novels and television series, must deal immediately with hordes of ravenous dead and the constant threat of sudden attack. But he also must face an emotional assault every bit as awful as his current plight -- the probable destruction of his family of whom he can find no trace in the deserted and dangerous suburban tract he once called home.

In contemporary zombie fiction, the living fight for survival in a world that cannot be understood using pre-zombie outbreak frames

of reference. Survivors must live in a regime imposed by the undead, in a more primitive state of human existence. But despite the near total triumph of the dead, life goes on, as the survivors alter their habits, assumptions, concerns, and routines to adapt to this extraordinary new age. Dehumanization appears to be a constant threat that the living must resist. The urge for survival dictates that zombie attackers must be destroyed, typically with firearms and edged weapons. This seems to create a growing callousness of conscience as pre-apocalyptic norms and conventions are, of necessity, abandoned. Ordinary people who never used violence in the pre-apocalypse world are transformed into efficient and enthusiastic merchants of zombie elimination.

This is not an environment in which the tenderhearted and sentimental can long endure. In The Walking Dead series a kindly veterinarian and farmer, Herschel, captured and held family members and neighbors who had turned into zombies in order to keep them "safe" until a cure was discovered. Other survivors see his humanistic impulse as bizarre, foolhardy, and dangerous in the extreme. In effect, Herschel displayed a new conception of deviancy -- one entirely antithetical to the new reality. By failing to adapt to the changing ethics of his companions, Herschel moved from normal to abnormal, demonstrating the fluidity of ethics. He refused to abandon his basic sense of decency and his belief that, even in their current undead state, his loved ones and neighbors maintained some semblance of their former humanity. It is this rewriting of moral and ethical codes that makes zombie stories fascinating and which also links them to contemporary life. A teacher might use the rethinking of morality in a zombie story to lead students into a discussion of shifting cultural moral views concerning the justness of war or police profiling or other contemporary social issues. When the world changes, particularly in times of crisis, ethics also sometimes must change.

During the fourteenth-century plague there were many instances in which familial bonds could not withstand death on the grand scale. In his Decameron, Boccaccio noted with incredulity and disgust the abandonment of sick family members: "The disaster had struck fear into the hearts of men and women that brother abandoned brother, uncle abandoned nephew, sister left brother, and very often wife abandoned husband, and even worse- almost unbelievable-fathers and mothers neglected to tend and care for their children as if they were not their own" (Boccaccio 9). The Bishop's Registry for the Diocese of York observed that traditional Christian conventions that mandated care and reverence for the bodies of the dead were ignored as the mechanisms for mass corpse removal and burial went into motion: "The bodies of the parishioners of the said chapel, [parish church] when they died, were and are carried hither with cruel roughness, having their bones broken, and are very often left unburied in the waters and the wood." Indeed the plague brought sudden death, death alone, death without sacramental provision and spiritual consolation; ugly painful, horrifying death that to all appearances had triumphed over the world of the living. The newly ascendant kingdom of death made a mockery of Paul's exhortation to

Christians of Corinth, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55). To the people of the fourteenth century, just as to the fictional survivors of a zombie apocalypse, death and the grave seemed all too victorious.

Those who survive an initial plague outbreak, like those survive an initial zombie apocalypse, typically face many difficult decisions. Survivors must decide whether to remain fixed in place or risk movement in a dangerous death-filled environment to find a less dangerous place of refuge. When the plague arrived in a region in medieval times, flight seemed the best defense. "Flee quickly and far away and stay a long time was the standard advice during plague time" (Byrne 201). Plague survivors sought places of refuge that were "disease free." In the introduction of his Decameron, Boccaccio protagonists meet and agree to leave their city in order to find refuge at a country estate. In zombie apocalypse scenarios we find erstwhile soccer moms, pizza deliverymen, and police officers who have taken to the highways and byways in order to reach locations that are presumed to be zombie-free zones or are purported to at least be less polluted with the undead than their current location.

During the course of their flight, both the zombie tale survivors and their fourteenth century counterparts usually come upon horrific tableaus of carnage and death. In his chronicle, La Peste di Milano, Bishop Frederico Borromeo noted that many who took to the roads seeking refuge, "… fell, having hastened death and joined the cadavers already spread along the ground; it was almost impossible to take a step or even set one's foot down without touching the limbs of the dead. And these bodies, whether because of mud and slime caused by the continual rain, or their nudity, or the corruption of the ulcers, upset people's hearts and filled them with terror" (Ripamonti 27). Boccaccio observed that the roads in northern Italy were all but impassable due to hosts of panicked refugees who fell victim to the plague as well as to predatory humans, "In early stages of the plague the roads were crowded with carts loaded with refugees and their goods, prime targets for highwaymen" (Byrne 203). One is immediately put in mind of The Walking Dead television show and its long close-ups and subsequent zoom-outs that reveal a nightmare landscape of vehicle wreckage and corpses that have been savaged by the undead.

Boccaccio's comment that plague refugees were likely to be victimized by those with larcenous or murderous intentions indicates that in catastrophic events the strong will often take advantage of the weak. One of the casualties of catastrophe, whether historical or fictional, is the concept of duly constituted authority. As the strictures of the law are loosened and ultimately dissolved, the world as people knew it anteapocalyptica devolves into Hobbesian dystopia engendering its relentless "war of all against all." In the new reality, the living have as much to fear from each other as they do from disease or the fictional undead. To paraphrase the late Barry Goldwater, it seems that radical selfishness in the defense of life is no vice in the midst of catastrophe and chaos. The Darwinian struggle for scarce resources amongst survivors can, of course, sometimes bring out the

best in human beings, but all too often it is the worst characteristics that emerge.

In zombie fiction, those survivors who have military training or facility in the use of firearms and survival techniques have a definite advantage in the fight for survival. In some cases heavily armed groups of survivors use their advantages to prey upon and eliminate their less aggressive fellows. This was also the case in the fourteenth century as those struggling with mere survival in the midst of death had to contend with roving bands of soldiers and mercenaries who were "brutal, crafty, resourceful and unafraid of civilians. None of these men paid attention to the niceties of 'bills of health,' quarantines, or cordons sanitaires, nor did they recognize other plague-fighting efforts of towns or states" (Byrne 201).

For fictional survivors in a world ruled by the undead, basic survival requires the suspension of trust, compassion, and hospitality. Anyone outside the group is reflexively treated with fear and suspicion. The stranger(s) could have been bitten or harbor ill intentions toward the group and their resources. Zombie bites and murderous intent are easy to conceal from the unwary. Out of necessity the "other" is always perceived as enemy until their status and purposes can be ascertained to the group's satisfaction. In the time of the plague fear of the outsider was likewise the order of the day as "every traveller was a potential harbinger of death: the merchant carried it in his wares, the refugee in his clothing, the stranger in his touch, and the vagabond in his very stare" (Byrne 127). During both fictional and historical catastrophes the established modus vivendi for survival requires the elimination of human compassion and charity.

During the zombie apocalypse the constant need for resources of all kinds leads desperate survivors back into zombie-infested urban zones to harvest food, medical supplies, weapons, and ammunition. Such foraging expeditions are typically depicted as fraught with danger and the possibility of sudden death. Often these "shopping trips" are conducted on multiple occasions and to multiple sites. In the midst of the fourteenth-century plague, those who had sought refuge in the countryside were often led by necessity back to urban areas which had become the loci of contagion: "Having used up what food they had brought, however, quite as few had to return to the plague-besieged city for more and many of those ended up diseased and dead" (Wilson 157). As with our fictional zombie apocalypse survivors, those who had to endure the outbreak of the plague had to face the dangers inherent in constructing a tenuous logistical network.

It does appear, then, that the plague years in Europe offer a unique opportunity to incorporate contemporary popular culture as a means of helping students to imagine a world that has descended into mass death and utter chaos. Typically history instructors will compare and contrast similar events occurring in different historical periods in order to "get the point across." The inherent problem in this traditional pedagogical approach, especially in dealing with wars, plagues, and other such catastrophes, is that students have no first-hand knowledge of either of the historical periods offered up as comparisons. Most students lack the necessary background knowledge

to compare the effect of the Black Death with something on the order of the great influenza pandemic of 1918-1922. For contemporary students the "plague" of 1918-1922 is just as distant to them as the fourteenth century plague. What contemporary students do have reference to is popular culture. Thus the inventive instructor could employ with advantage the numerous examples of catastrophe and chaos found in popular zombie graphic novels, literature, film, and television miniseries to help students gain some basic understanding of real historical disasters.

Conclusions

> It has been established that persons who have recently died have been returning to life and committing acts of murder. A widespread investigation of funeral homes, morgues, and hospitals has concluded that the unburied dead have been returning to life and seeking human victims. It's hard for us here to be reporting this to you, but it does seem to be a fact.
>
> ~*The Night of the Living Dead*

Helping students connect to the past is one of the primary goals of any history class. Accomplishing this in today's classes can be difficult for a myriad of reasons, ranging from ever-increasing class sizes to a lack of appreciation for the value historical knowledge can provide to students in the modern era. Faced with these problems, history professors need to be more creative in their pedagogical approaches if they want to reach their students effectively. One solution is to incorporate modern ideas/issues/culture, such as zombies, into history courses and to focus both on the similarities and differences between modern views on zombies/death and the people who lived in the past. By first identifying the similarities, students will be able to relate better to their contemporaries and feel empathy for them.

> "Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature."
>
> ~David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

By then focusing on the differences, students are able to appreciate what makes the cultures unique. The students will no longer see the differences as barriers to understanding the past, but as exciting opportunities, much like visiting a foreign country -- "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently" (Hartley 1).

Some might be tempted to think that incorporating zombies into the classroom is an activity at best relegated to a recent U.S. history class, but this underestimates the timeless and universal nature of the undead. In this article, we have shown how zombies can be effectively incorporated into ancient and medieval history courses. Zombie literature can also be worked into many other history courses. For example, the earliest zombie films in the 1920's and 1930's (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, White Zombie) focus on a type

of zombie who is controlled by a zombie master through the use of voodoo. These zombies are still living humans who are placed into a trance and their every movement is controlled by the zombie master, who has taken away their will. These zombies reflect the fears of the time period following the cataclysmic events of World War I and the Great Depression where people felt like they had lost control of their lives and questioned their very existence. Another example is George Romero's 1968 cult classic Night of the Living Dead which tells the story of seven people trapped by zombies in a farmhouse located in southwestern Pennsylvania. While the focus of the story is on how the seven fight for their survival, the movie reflects the plethora of issues affecting the United States in the 1960's: race, gender, the spread of communism, and governmental control. The slow-moving, expressionless zombies in Night of the Living Dead can be seen to represent the robotic, faceless communists who threatened America's existence during the Cold War. Finally, the zombie movies of the last twenty years where zombies are depicted as infected humans, demonstrate current fears of global pandemics from the various infectious diseases that are discussed in the news and on the web (SARS, Bird Flu, and Ebola). The manner in which zombies are portrayed allow students to see visual reflections of society's anxieties and fears at a particular time in history (Platts). Beyond historical concerns, the issues embedded in zombie literature cut across a wide range of disciplines, making zombie works worth consideration by teachers in many fields.

The terrifying concept of the dead coming back to life is one that many different societies, not just modern ones, share. It is our task as historians and educators to connect past and present. What is past is present. The circumstances may differ, but the human condition and its attendant fears are timeless.

> "We fear death so profoundly, not because it means the end of our body, but because it means the end of our consciousness - better to be a spirit in Heaven than a zombie on Earth."
>
> ~Alison Gopnik

While studying zombies in their many formats (movies, books, video games, etc.) is fun, it does have its value in the classroom. An instructor can capitalize on the ever-increasing popularity of zombies by using them as a vehicle to connect with today's students to discuss profound issues that have affected people around the world, and throughout history.

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